

An Interview With Elijah Wald

by Peter Stone Brown

July 25th is the 50th anniversary of the night Bob Dylan took the stage at Newport Folk Festival with an electric band and in doing so, shook up not only the festival, but the contemporary folk scene in America (and quite possibly in England) in a way that neither would be the same again. *Dylan Goes Electric* is a brand new book by author and musician Elijah Wald, who has written extensively about American roots music. Drawing on both new and previous accounts of what went down that night, Wald provides a new and comprehensive look at the various people and forces in play that make Newport '65 still a topic of discussion.

PSB: What made you want to take the subject on knowing that very few accounts of this were the same?

EW: That was actually what got me fascinated. What happened was Bruce Jackson wrote a book called *The Story Is True*, about folklore and myths. And he treated the whole story of Dylan getting booed at Newport as a myth. And I ended up in an online list of music historians mentioning that, and a bunch of people said, "No, he did get booed." And we went back and forth for a while. And this happened to be in February a couple of years ago, and it just hit me if I could sort out a version of the Dylan story that was interesting in time for the 50th anniversary, I could sell a book. And I'm a freelance writer, I like to sell books. So that was really the spur. And then, as I guess always happens, once I started researching it, I just got fascinated. Not even so much in that night as just in how much I hadn't understood about the way the whole story developed.

One of the things I liked was you presented Bob as a rock and roller from the very beginning. You know, when he was a kid and then going to the University of Minnesota where he really started to learn about folk music. I liked that aspect because it made the book not the same old thing.

I honestly have to thank Peter Stampfel to a great degree for that. I mean Stampfel was the one - I quote him saying that when he first saw Dylan onstage right after Dylan arrived in New York, it was like this bolt of lightning saying that you could sing old time music like it was rock and roll. And my first reaction was, "*Really* Peter, it doesn't sound that way to me." And then I went back and listened and he was absolutely right.

Do you think Dylan's decision to play the Evening Concert with a band was as spontaneous as it's made out to be?

Yes. I can't believe if it had not been that spontaneous, he wouldn't have actually rehearsed a band a little more than that. I mean all you have to do is listen to Jerome Arnold's bass playing, and you can believe it was as spontaneous as they say it was.

Do you think as Peter Yarrow sort of says in the book that Dylan misjudged his audience?

I don't think he cared very much. But I mean, I don't know. First of all, the set was *really* disorganized. And I don't think he expected it to be that disorganized. My guess is considering that when he had been onstage Saturday afternoon, everybody had been screaming for him to play "Like A Rolling Stone." And that's definitely what the crowd is screaming for at the afternoon thing. I would think that he would have expected a lot of people in the crowd to be absolutely thrilled that he was doing that. And honestly, I think it's an open question. If he had simply hit the stage and done a hot three electric songs, if the sound had been on top of it and everything, I have no idea what would have happened. I know that some people would have been upset. But the people who were excited would have been more excited. And that could have tipped the balance in a very different way. So I don't know. I think Pete Seeger would have been equally upset either way. But the way it was, I think some people who could potentially have been excited by the set weren't.

I can go with that. I mean there's other people who've talked about it. Geoff Muldaur for example has been quoted as saying "It just wasn't good."

Right, Geoff says it was just lousy and Geoff also says that he was standing far enough back that the problem was just not the mix upfront. Geoff is a man of strong opinions, and he holds to them, and I agree with a lot of them and not all of them. I have no idea what I would have thought had I been there. And I have no idea how accurate anybody's memory is. A perfect example of that, and I didn't end up using this in the book, but I have a friend who was there at age 15 and who clearly remembers loving Dylan's electric set. But also clearly remembers that he had back home his acoustic guitar on which he scrawled an X through Dylan's face on the picture he had of Dylan on the inside cover 'cause he was so angry about Newport. So he has both the memory of loving it and the memory that he clearly must have hated it. (laughs)

I can understand that and I think even when *Bringing It All Back Home* came out and before that the single of "Subterranean," it was a shock, even though all indications if you were paying attention to what Dylan was doing, was that he was moving towards rock and roll.

Yeah and also people felt special about Dylan. And it's – part of what I was trying to convey in this book is just that the extent to which this had bigger meaning than just what it sounded like. I mean that's why I was so pleased to have that scrapbook that I quote from Herb Van Dam and Judy Landers who love all the pop-folk. They love Peter, Paul and Mary, they love all that stuff. And yet, Dylan for them is selling out for them because Dylan is just supposed to be something different. Which was a hell of a weight for him to carry, but that's part of the story.

And speaking of that, when you go into the whole thing of The Weavers changing folksongs to sort of make them commercial, though that may not have been everybody's intent.

Well, I mean they certainly – you know The Weavers with Gordon Jenkins' arrangements, that sure as hell was the intent. Pete Seeger has always been absolutely explicit that the whole idea of The Weavers was to become commercial stars, to have that power to then use for good rather than evil. But he always has framed The Weavers not as something he did for artistic reasons, but as something he did because he realized that the fact that he was just out on the fringes and couldn't draw a paying audience was limiting his effectiveness. And The Weavers were gonna be his way to become a star and hence more effective. And what's so crazy about that story is that it worked.

But the crazy thing is the way you just framed it, it also fits in with his whole political thing.

Sure. But it fits in with his political thing in a somewhat different way than the usual framing of him as sort of a head in the skies saint, who was not selling himself with the world. And gets us a bit more in Pete as someone who not only had politics, but had a sense of tactics. And he did brilliantly. All you had to do was see him onstage and you could see that. But I mean one of the huge problems with Pete as a story and one of the things that I tried to deal with somewhat in this book, but it's always hard, is that we tend to understand music history in the 20th Century at least, by listening to records. And what Pete did on a stage is not on the records. I love that Jon Pankake thing comparing him to Williams Jennings Bryan, but it's not crazy. I mean he just had that live magic. It just isn't there on the recordings. I mean making the case for what was so great about Pete Seeger to someone who never saw him live, they have to take it on faith because there's no way you can prove it.

I'd say the closest he got to capturing it was the *We Shall Overcome* Carnegie '63 release.

Yeah, that's a, you know, I like that record a lot. But keep in mind, you or I when we listen to that record remember seeing Pete live. Saying to someone who never saw Pete live, listen to this, you'll hear how great he was live, they don't. I mean some love the record. I'm not saying - you know I can put together a collection of really good Pete Seeger stuff. I think the man was a *terrific* musician in a lot of ways. But the magic is a another story.

Back again to the festival, I found that the cast of characters in the book, especially the people who were involved in the festival all along, the Board of Directors was quite interesting, and it seemed like George Wein was kind of the voice of reason.

I think that's appropriately said, yeah. No, I mean George was constantly from the beginning the person saying guys, you know, yeah, that's great. On the other hand, (laughs).

Well, you know just the whole thing of everybody wanting to kick Albert Grossman out of the festival and he's going "Hold on a second."

Yeah. I mean that's an interesting story to me because when I first read that, I was a little dubious, and I still don't know 100 percent sure that it's true, but apparently it's true. I've since heard that somebody has told me that Pete told them that story too. I asked Peter Yarrow and George Wein and both of them, I was interested to hear both of them saying, "I don't remember, but it makes sense to me. You know it sounds right." But I mean Lomax, you know Alan Lomax was an incredibly important, incredibly brilliant, incredibly significant and incredibly difficult man.

The more I read and find out about him, the more complex he becomes. All the stuff you point out about him about doing the shows and bringing on rock acts in 1959 at a folk show. It's outrageous.

Yeah, exactly. I mean he's trying to bring on The Cadillacs. And his whole point was if you want folk music in New York, folk music in New York is the doo wop guys in Harlem, not a bunch of college kids with banjos. It was completely consistent with his broader position. It's just not the way people, you know people want to simplify his broader position and I don't mean people in general. There was a war that happened in the '60s going into the '70s of a bunch of rock critics who were trying to write intelligently about rock and roll in a world where a lot of the gatekeepers considered rock and roll stupid, and folk music intelligent. And a lot of them never got rid of the chip on their shoulder from that period, and like to think of the whole folk world as essentially liking insipid music and hating rock and roll. And so

Lomax, the whole idea of purism gets lumped into that, when in fact Lomax's purism was a very, very different kind of purism. He was a purist, but he was a purist in a way, much more the way Greil Marcus in a purist, than in the way people who don't want to hear anything from after 1920 are purists.

One of the things about Dylan that a lot of the folkies didn't seem to realize, and this didn't necessarily happen in the '60s, but happened later when he started revisiting folksongs, he started turning people onto a lot of music that they wouldn't have known about, just by singing the songs.

With his radio show and all, yeah absolutely. No, I mean that's one of the things that's so funny about all of this and I don't hit it over the head, but I do talk about it briefly right at the end of the book, is by now everybody thinks of Dylan as a patron saint of roots music. I mean everybody now associates, I mean any young person now associates Dylan with old fashioned music. And with good reason. Obviously the new Sinatra one is an extreme example in a way, but the idea that Dylan is a rejection of folk music is ridiculous including that particular night at Newport. I mean what Dylan was rejecting, whatever it was, was not folk music.

No, it was more the other stuff that came along with it in a sense.

Well, it's important to remember that there was a world of purists who Dylan came out of, like the *Little Sandy Review* people, who hated Baez and Peter, Paul & Mary and all of that and considered it not folk music. And who liked the electric Dylan stuff. I mean that's one of the things - again, I don't hit this over the head, but I do try to sort of say it in the book. I mean people completely misunderstand if they think that the hardcore purists were the ones who were upset. The ones who were upset were the Peter, Paul & Mary fans. I mean there were hardcore purists who had never liked Dylan. But the hardcore purists who liked early Dylan tended to like - you know he himself said that. I mean that's one of the quotes that when I found it, I was like yeah that makes sense, was him saying, "I don't think the people who were upset were my early fans. My early fans are still with me. It's the people who just found out about me in the last couple of years." And I think that's right. It was the people whose idea of Bob Dylan was "Blowin' In The Wind." Not the people whose idea of Bob Dylan was "Highway 51."

Well, in my case, we didn't get the first Dylan album until like a year later. I heard "Baby, Let Me Follow You Down" on some folk radio show and I thought, "I didn't know he could play guitar like that." Discovering that whole record was a whole different thing than *Freewheelin'*.

Right, which again, it's very, very hard I think for people who came along later to understand that most people discovered, most people heard Dylan songs before they knew who Dylan was. That fuel is so foreign for people even five years younger than you, but certainly people ten, 20, 30, 40, 50 years younger than you 'cause they all had heard of Dylan before they heard the music.

Are you aware that when Dylan returned to Newport in 2002, the day the show was announced, he was on tour, I think it was in Germany, and he played with his band an acoustic version of "Maggie's Farm?"

I didn't know that. That's funny.

He does these funny little things. He gives the impression that he's not paying attention when he is paying attention, if you read the signs.

I mean the temptation to interpret, I don't escape it completely, but I tried to back off as often as I could because boy, do I feel that temptation.

That was one of the things I liked about the book, because you had the chapter on Pete, and then the chapter on Dylan, and you managed to do it and stay away from interpretation. You had to mention a couple of songs here and there, but you basically kept the focus on the music.

Yeah, well clearly I just sort of felt like there'd been all these discussions for all this time, and they don't all agree with each other but they were all discussing the same thing. Let's discuss something else for a while. And obviously I also think that that's one of the advantages of the focus that I had by just thinking about that night, because whatever it was that made Dylan decide to go electric, it wasn't the poetry. So I'm not disagreeing with anyone who says the poetry is the most important thing about Dylan. That's a perfectly reasonable opinion. But it's not the most important thing about Dylan for this story. And I think it's an interesting story because the thing in a way that I will take away from this project is I had never really gotten into the late, what for some people is golden era of Dylan with "*Love And Theft*." When I first heard them, I just went okay, whatever. And this project, I went back to them and just completely fell in love with them and I just listen to them over and over and over and you know, that's a gift. That's really exciting for me to discover something new that I like that much. And it just reminded me, he talks about that in *Chronicles*. I enjoyed *Chronicles*. But one of the things I found most striking in it is that moment where he's sort of saying, I couldn't write like I used to write, I didn't have that magic anymore, I was thinking of just giving up, and then I realized, wait a minute, I can just be a musician. I used to be a musician. I could do that again." And

yeah, Dylan is often mysterious and will say one thing one day, and another thing another day. But in terms of this project, that way of thinking about who he was just made a lot of sense.